

# 1

## Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1

Paṭhama Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta The First Discourse Related to Nirvana | U 8.1

Theme: The full nirvana pericope

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### 1 Significance of the 4 Suttas

1.0 There are four discourses with the same title: **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta**, “Discourse Related to Nirvana.” They describe nirvana with different themes as shown here:

		<u>Keyword</u>	
<b>Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1</b>	U 8.1/71/p80	the full nirvana pericope <sup>1</sup>	SD 50.1
<b>Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 2</b>	U 8.2/72/p80 f	the “bent-free” ( <i>anata</i> ) nirvana formula	SD 50.2
<b>Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 3</b>	U 8.3/73/p80 f	the “birth-free” ( <i>ajāta</i> ) nirvana formula	SD 50.3
<b>Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 4</b>	U 8.4/74/p81	the “non-dependent” ( <i>anissita</i> ) nirvana formula	SD 50.4

#### 1.1 NIBBĀNA PAṬISAṂYUTTA SUTTA 1

##### 1.1.0 The full nirvana pericope

1.1.0.1 The Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1 presents this description of nirvana which, on account of its details, can be regarded as the “full nirvana pericope” or complete stock passage on nirvana, thus:

<i>a</i> 4	There is, bhikshus, that place where there is	
<i>b</i>	no earth, no water, no fire, no wind;	<i>n’eva paṭhavī na āpo na tejo na vāyo</i>
<i>c</i>	no base of boundless space;	<i>na ākāśānañ-c’āyatanam</i>
<i>d</i>	no base of boundless consciousness;	<i>na viññāṇaṅc’āyatanam</i>
<i>e</i>	no base of nothingness;	<i>na ākiñcaññ’āyatanam</i>
<i>f</i>	no base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception;	<i>na n’eva,saññā,nāsaññ’āyatanam</i>
<i>g</i>	neither this world nor other worlds;	<i>nāyam loko na para,loko</i>
	with neither the moon nor the sun.	<i>na ubho candima,sūriyā</i>
<i>a</i> 5	Therein, bhikshus, I say, there is	
<i>b</i>	neither coming nor going nor standing;	<i>n’eva āgatiṃ ... na gatiṃ na ṭhitiṃ</i>
<i>c</i>	neither death nor birth;	<i>na cutiṃ na upapattiṃ</i>
<i>d</i>	neither the established nor the occurring;	<i>appatiṭṭham appavattam</i>
<i>e</i>	nor even this sense-object.	<i>anārammaṇam ev’etaṃ—</i>
6	This, indeed, is the very end of suffering.	<i>es’ev’anto dukkhassa</i> [§§4-6]

Essentially, §4 refers to the physical or cosmological states (all the levels of being: the external or “physical” universe as a whole), while §5 refers to mental phenomena, and §6 to nirvana itself.

<sup>1</sup> A pericope (Gk, “cutting around”), in Buddhist studies, is an excerpt (usually a set of verses or passage) from a canonical text that forms a coherent unit, either as a definitive passage on a doctrinal or textual topic, or for public reading (such as during a puja). A formula, as used here, is similar to a pericope, but rarer and not as encompassing as a pericope.

**1.1.0.2** The full nirvana pericope [§§4-6] is divided into two parts, or three, if §6 is taken separately, thus:

<b>[§4]</b> the external or physical universe	(cosmology)	[1.1.1];
<b>[§5]</b> the internal universe or mental phenomena	(psychology)	[1.1.2]; and
<b>[§6]</b> nirvana itself	(soteriology)	[1.1.3].

### **1.1.1 The external universe**

**1.1.1.1** The first part of the pericope [§4] deals with the external or physical universe. It is vital to notice and understand this, so that we do not erroneously view that nature, the world or the universe attains nirvana. Such an notion may be imaginative or poetic, but that is about all it is. If we stop there, then, it only shows we have not fully understood the significance of this first passage.

It is, of course, possible to say something like “the physical universe” has attained nirvana. This, however, is spoken from the awakened one’s viewpoint, so to speak. All this physicality still impacts or affects his physical being, but it does not test or trouble his awakened mind. In an important way, the awakened mind now truly sees the world as it really is. As for the world itself, it remains the same—the unawakened will still see it in their own way, and be affected accordingly. We must distinguish the way of words—the “Zen” of words, if you like—and the direct experience of the awakened mind.

**1.1.1.2** The full nirvana pericope first states that **the 4 primary elements** (*mahā dhātu*)—earth, water, fire and wind—are absent from nirvana [§4b]. This means that nirvana is beyond matter and space (they go together), beyond the external or physical universe [1.1.1.1]. When these elements are absent, it follows that physical change, decay and suffering, too, are absent from nirvana.

**1.1.1.3** The term “**base**” (*āyatana*) [§4cdef] refers to the 4 formless levels of meditation mentioned, but implies the 4 form dhyanas, too.<sup>2</sup> As conditioned states, these formless bases arise when the 4 elements or physical existence are transcended. Unlike nirvana—where both space and time do not exist—although these formless bases have transcended space and time only for the duration of the meditation. Time may be transcended in the formless bases, but it has not ended. The meditator, in fact, returns to the 4 elements (in other words, space and time) when he emerges from these states.

**1.1.1.4** For the arhats and the non-returners who have mastered meditation, after the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless dhyanas, there is a ninth level—the **cessation of perception and feeling** (*saññā-vedayita, nirodha*). This is not stated here for good reason.<sup>3</sup> This is a state that can be only be cultivated at a proper time, but it is an experience of temporary nirvanic bliss and stasis (all life functions and signs as we know them are suspended). In other words, this is the state of nirvana induced by the meditator while he still lives, and which can be described in the same words of the full nirvana pericope.

**1.1.1.5** Our world (the earth and the solar system) and **the universe as a whole** do *not* exist in nirvana. There is a simple reason for this: they are all bound and conditioned by time and space. As such, they are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and go through cycles of evolution, stasis, devolution, stasis ad infinitum. In this sense, the whole process is “eternal,” but it only perpetuates decay, destruction, unsatisfactoriness and suffering.

<sup>2</sup> The formless dhyanas are actually progressively more refined stages of the 4<sup>th</sup> dhyana: see SD 8.4 (12.3).

<sup>3</sup> Pace Johansson (1969:51 = 1970:44).

### 1.1.2 The internal universe

**1.1.2.1** The second part of the full nirvana pericope [§5] refers to **the internal universe**—the mind and experience of the awakened. Before we continue, it helps to highlight an important point: although we speak of an “external” universe [1.1.1.1] and an “internal” universe, they are not really separate worlds, but merely perspectives from which we view “the world” (the all, *sabba*),<sup>4</sup> that is, aspects of the awakened mind in contrast to the unawakened mind. This helps us have a better picture or vision of what it means (as far as we can understand) to be awakened and what nirvana is like.

**1.1.2.2** The “internal universe” section of the nirvana pericope begins by stating that nirvana has **“neither coming nor going nor standing”** [§5b]. Basically, this means that in nirvana there is neither movement nor activity as we experience or see them in ourself or our world. More broadly, this refers to motion, change and decay of existence.

On an even broader level, this line refers to our place in the scheme of things, as it were—where we fit into the whole existential universe: our cosmological standpoint. We move on from one birth to another, or, often enough, we are caught (**“standing”**) in an in-between state, an intermediate birth, sustained by craving.<sup>5</sup> Hence, this is an allusion to the whole gamut of the 31 planes of existence and the intermediate state.<sup>6</sup>

**1.1.2.3** The next line states that there is **“neither death nor birth”** in nirvana [§5b]. Impermanence entails physical and mental decay, which, in the case of sentient beings, entails being born and dying—that’s life. There is nothing physical or mental in nirvana; hence, there is no impermanence—which means no decay of any kind—and, as such, no birth, and without birth, there is no death. We can only see the *logic* of it here, but nirvana is the reality of it.

On a broader scale, birth and death are dichotomies—when there is one, there is also the other. It is meaningless to speak of “eternal life”—this is the error of eternalism (*sassata, diṭṭhi*). Just because we can say it, define it, or pontificate about it, does not mean that it is real: we cannot define any non-existent thing into existence.<sup>7</sup> For that reason, early Buddhism does not speak of any eternal state—not even nirvana—except in comparison with samsara. Nirvana, in short, does not have any attributes.

**1.1.2.4** The full nirvana pericope goes on to say that nirvana is **“neither the established nor the occurring [the emergent]”** (*appatiṭṭham appavattam*) [§§], or more literally, we can take the Pali words to mean “neither what has happened nor what is happening,” or more simply, “neither the occurred nor the occurring.” In a sense, there is “nothing” happening in nirvana—but this is already saying too much. “Nothing” presumes a “something,” of which it lacks, but this does not apply to nirvana. If we understand this limitation of language and logic, then, perhaps we can make sense of saying that *“there is nothing happening in nirvana.”*

Technically, **“neither the established”** (*appatiṭṭhitam*) means “without any foothold, nor finding of any support for consciousness.” Hence, there is neither sensing nor knowing. By itself, the term is usually translated as “neither finding nor having a foothold.” Consciousness, when it exists, it always a con-

<sup>4</sup> See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

<sup>5</sup> See **Kutūhala S** (S 44.9,15), SD 23.15.

<sup>6</sup> If we have issues with the “intermediate state” (*antarā, bhava*), then, we should simply omit it from our mind, and digest the rest.

<sup>7</sup> It is different when we imagine fabulous humans and beings, and fantastic places and events, as literature. Fiction can be a useful and healthy means of education and entertainment, provided we respect the fact that it is not real.

sciousness of a sense-object. It is meaningless to speak of a self-existent “consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> Consciousness, in other words, has a conditioned and relative existence.

“**Nor the occurring**”—an alternate translation of “nor the emergent” (*appavattatam*)—means that nirvana is without any event, it is eventless, not related to time, time-free. Nirvana, then, is a timeless, or better, “time-free” place. Again, we have to take the word “place” (*pada*) in a very loose sense—just to help the flow of our thoughts—since nirvana is not located anywhere. Note that the word “place” appears in the very first sentence of the full nirvana pericope.

**1.1.2.5** The next statement—that nirvana is “**nor even this sense-object**” (*anārammaṇam ev’etaṃ*) is very interesting in cognitive terms. The Udāna Commentary explains that despite its formless nature, nirvana is unlike feeling, perception, formations or consciousness—all these exist or occur relative to sense-objects. In other words, nirvana does not “sense” anything at all in the way we understand the word, *sense*.

Notice the language here: “Nirvana does not sense anything at all”; we do not say, “In nirvana, we do not sense anything at all.” Without the “I” or “we”—the subject—there is no object. Nirvana is beyond both the subjective and the objective. This is what it means to say that nirvana is “without an object” (*anārammaṇa*) whatsoever; there is no propping up of any object of the senses or of the mind.

**1.1.2.6** Technically, *ārammaṇa* has two meanings:

- (1) an object of consciousness (when we are *conscious*, we are always conscious “of” something);
- (2) support (that is, an underlying layer of consciousness that makes sense of the object).

Dhammapāla (the author of the Udāna Commentary) explains that nirvana is without any object in both these senses—that is, it neither takes an object nor has an underlying support. (UA 392)

### **1.1.3 Anto dukkhassa [§6]**

**1.1.3.1** The last statement in the full nirvana pericope—“this, indeed, is the very end of suffering”—sounds very familiar. In fact, it refers to the 3<sup>rd</sup> noble truth, that is, nirvana. Hence, “the ending of suffering” (*anto dukkhassa*) clearly refers to nirvana. Fittingly, it is also the last statement—the climax—of the full nirvana pericope and the Sutta teaching. It is also the final destination of Buddhist training.

**1.1.3.2** Interestingly, from this closing statement—on the “ending of suffering”—we can take it as summing up all that has been stated before in the pericope. As a whole, then, the full nirvana pericope is a clarification or definition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> noble truth.

Even then, this is only *one* way that nirvana can be described. We have other descriptions of nirvana in three other suttas, all with the same title of **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta**. The reason for such a variety of suttas describing nirvana is clear: Nirvana cannot really be *defined*: it can only be described—the way we talk about a sunset or a destination that we have yet to reach.

### **1.1.4 Overview of the Sutta teaching**

**1.1.4.1** The Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1 (U 8.1) preserves the full nirvana pericope [§§4-6], which comprises three important and integral sections (as denoted by the section numbers). In summary, these sections describe nirvana in these 3 different ways, thus:

<sup>8</sup> See *Vīññāṇa*, SD 17.8a (7).

[§4] Nirvana is where objective existence—the objects and conditions of our world—are not found, where the 8 levels of meditation (the 4 form and 4 formless dhyanas are objectified as the dimensions of existence)—especially birth, life and death—are left behind.

[§5] Nirvana is free from any subjective experience, the kind that is with which we normally “see” the world as subject and object. Nirvana can be described as where all such distinctions have disappeared; hence, our ordinary conceptual structure simply do not apply. It is described as a state of oneness as well as boundlessness, the transcendence of both objectivity [§4] and subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

[§6] Nirvana is the utter ending of suffering.

For the sake of discussion, we can imagine—since we have not attained nirvana—that the first paragraph [§4] addresses nirvana’s freedom from space and the second paragraph [§5] its freedom from time. We will soon see the expedience of such notions.

**1.1.4.2** Nirvana’s being beyond space seems to be the theme of **the (Samudda) Uposatha Sutta 2** (U 5.5), where the Buddha declares that just as the ocean neither shrinks or overflows, “so, too, although many monks attain the nirvana-element without residue, neither the decrease or the fullness of that nirvana-element is evident.”<sup>10</sup> The point is that everyone attains *the same* nirvana—all fires are extinguished in the same way (through the lack of fuel, *upādāna*) [2.3.2.4]. Since nirvana is neither defined nor delimited by space, it is not overwhelmed or in any way affected by the number of beings entering it, so to speak.

**1.1.4.3** The idea of beings “entering” nirvana should be carefully noted, too. This is only an English expression—there is no such sentence in Pali. The suttas often use the verbs *nibbāyati* [2.2.1] and *parinibbāyati* [2.2.2], both of which translate as “is extinguished.” In other words, after a fire is extinguished, it “goes” nowhere; there is nothing (so to speak) left after the extinguishing. In this sense, no one and nothing attains nirvana. It is simply the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hate and delusion.<sup>11</sup>

**1.1.4.4 The Kevaḍḍha Sutta** (D 11) closes with a famous passage on nirvana which throws some light on what we have just mentioned regarding nirvana in terms of space. The passage runs thus:

<i>Ettha āpo ca paṭhavī tejo vāyo na gādhati</i>	Here, earth, water, fire, and wind find no footing;
<i>Ettha dīghañ ca rassañ ca anuñ thūlam</i>	here, long and short, small and great, fair and foul;
<i>subhāsubham</i>	
<i>Ettha nāmañ ca rūpañ ca asesam uparujjhati</i>	here, name-and-form stop without residue:
<i>Viññāṇassa nirodhena etth’etañ uparujjhatīti</i>	with the cessation of consciousness, <i>this</i> stops here.” <sup>12</sup>

**Line a** is the familiar statement regarding the disappearance of the 4 primary elements—they “find no footing” (*na gādhati*), that is, consciousness is unable to find any object amongst them [2.1.2.1].

<sup>9</sup> The prec two sections are a revision of R E A Johansson’s insights, 1979:45.

<sup>10</sup> *Evam eva kho bhikkhave bahū ce pi bhikkhū anupādi, sesāya nibbāna, dhātuyā parinibbāyanti, nā tena nibbāna, dhātuyā ūnattam vā pūrattav vā paññāyati* (U 45/5.5/55), SD 59.2b. This parable recurs in **Pahārāda S** (A 8.19,15), SD 45.18.

<sup>11</sup> For the parable of the fire, see **Aggi Vaccha, gotta S** (M 72,19), SD 6.15.

<sup>12</sup> D 11,85/1:223 (SD 1.7). The Buddha makes a similar statement by way of an *udāna* (inspired utterance) on the parinirvana of **Bāhiya Dāru, cīriya**: “Where water, earth, fire and wind find no footing, | There neither brightness burns nor sun shines | There neither moon gleams nor darkness reigns. | When a sage, a brahmin, through wisdom has known this by himself. | Then he is freed from form and formless, from joy and pain.” (U 9). A similar verse is found at S 1.69/1:15, and a similar teaching is given by Mahā Cunda to Channa (S 35.87/4:59). On this verse (D 11,-85) see D:W 557 n242 & **Mahā Parinibbāna S**, SD 9 (9h).

**Line b** describes nirvana as being without any dimension or size, or any subjective idea of things.

**Line c** refers to the cognitive process of the mind (*nāma*) looking for objects (*rūpa*), that is, the interaction between the internal sense-faculties and their external sense-objects, bringing out sense-contacts. Even such a fundamental level of the cognitive process is missing from nirvana.

Finally, **line d** tells us that even consciousness itself—“*this*” (*etaṃ*)—ceases in nirvana. This last line is vital in making it clear that there is no subtle abiding consciousness whatsoever, not even an object-less consciousness (which is impossible)—which is like referring to a “sightless vision,” that is, blindness.

Interestingly, in this last line, nirvana is not even referred to as an *object*, but simply as “this,” that is, consciousness as we know it, ceased. Hence, there is all experience—whether cognitive (sense-based) or affective (purely mental experience)—as we understand them, cease to operate. There is *no* “object-less” consciousness or any kind of consciousness as we know it, or can know in samsara. This is the total ending of all human conceptualizing and knowing—the mind, so to speak, is fully free from even itself.<sup>13</sup>

**1.1.4.5** Once again, let us remind ourselves that the suttas, intentionally, do not give any definition of nirvana—nirvana defies definition. It is like trying to take a snapshot of the whole sky in our hand-phone. Even if we are able to get a crystal-clear digital picture, it is still not *it*. We must simply gaze at the beautiful sky, be there by ourself to feel the joy and peace of the moment. Then, we may have some idea of what nirvana is *like*. Let us continue to explore this path with such an understanding.

## 2 Describing nirvana

### 2.1 FUNCTIONS OF THE TERM “NIRVANA”

#### 2.1.1 Nirvana as a concept

**2.1.1.1** From the start, it helps us to understand that the sutta teachings on nirvana are all worded in such a way as to avoid any kind of definite conception of nirvana, and to discount any speculation about it. In fact, the Buddha often warns us specifically *not* to speculate on the posthumous state of an awakened saint.<sup>14</sup> Any such speculation would not only be fruitless, but would also seriously hinder us from our practice for awakening in this life itself. Moreover, our conception of nirvana is *not* nirvana, but merely a view, a private reality (*pacceka,sacca*), or at best, a view-truth (*diṭṭhi,sacca*),<sup>15</sup> of nirvana.

“To seek to know more is only to manufacture obstacles,” warns Cousins.<sup>16</sup> Our knowledge is all sense-based—dependent on the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—and based on their corresponding objects: what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, felt and thought. Nirvana is none of these—it is unconditioned, free of causes and effects, with neither relatedness nor relativity, beyond time and space. [3.3.2]

<sup>13</sup> The Buddha makes a similar statement by way of an Udāna (inspired utterance) on the parinirvana of **Bāhiya Dāru,cīriya**: “Where water, earth, fire and wind find no footing, | There neither brightness burns nor sun shines | There neither moon gleams nor darkness reigns. | When a sage, a brahmin, through wisdom has known this by himself. | Then, he is freed from form and formless, from joy and pain.” (U 9). A similar verse is found at S 1.69/1:15, and a similar teaching is given by Mahā Cunda to Channa (S 35.87/4:59. On this verse in **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,85), SD 1.7, see D:W 557 n242 & **Mahā Parinibbāna S**, SD 9 (9h).

<sup>14</sup> See **Anurādha S** (S 22.86,4), SD 21.13; **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63,2.2) + SD 5.8 (2+3); **The unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (3-4).

<sup>15</sup> Or, private truth (*pacceka,sacca*) and view-truths (*diṭṭhi,sacca*): see SD 40a.8 (5.2); SD 48.1 (6.1.2.5-6.1.2.10). On the nature of views and the need to abandon them, see **The notion of diṭṭhi**, SD 40a.1.

<sup>16</sup> L S Cousins, “Nibbāna and the Abhidhamma,” 1984:79.

**2.1.1.2** What we know tends to “fix” and finalise our understanding. Once we know something, we are likely to stop investigating. We are likely to reject other ways of seeing something, especially the possibility that we could be wrong. Knowledge tends to be a “snapshot,” a freeze-dried version, of what is real and living, something that needs to be experienced in the moment, every moment.

In this sense, nirvana can never be known; it can only be felt, directly experienced. It is “felt” in the sense of a personal and direct experience—even this is saying too much, stretching the limits of language precariously into unknown and unknowable territory.

**2.1.1.3** It’s like we are going on a long journey to visit a fabulous city for the first time. Our guide is describing to us various fascinating details about the city. We are shown maps and given guide-books, and even told how best to live in that city. The point is that we are not there yet. We are only preparing for the journey.

This study—any study of nirvana—is at best only a preparation for reaching the path that leads to nirvana. Whatever we discuss here, then, should help us, less to form ideas about nirvana, but more so to progressively clear our minds of our views about nirvana. Whatever ideas of nirvana we form at this stage is *not* nirvana—they are merely provisional visions of a fabulous place to which we have not yet been.

**2.1.1.4** Our task—we must constantly remind ourselves—is that of clearing our minds of whatever *views* we have of nirvana. We need to lose ourselves in this study so that we can feel the truth and beauty, the vision and joy, of the experience of nirvana that the Buddha and the arhats have experienced. An important purpose in this study, then, is for us to try to feel at least some of that joy as we study these texts.

The ground around us is thick with mist, and the sky clouded up. We are gingerly moving on—guided by our understanding and experience—watching our path, and looking around, and ahead at times. We may suddenly, momentarily, see the clearing of the mist, even a parting of clouds. Then, we may have a vision of where we are heading, even of the ancient city of Nirvana that is our goal. [3.3.1.10]

**2.1.1.5** But the mists and clouds are still there, and we have to mindfully keep on moving. Our study here, then, has the key purpose of helping us clear ourselves of any views of nirvana, and to try to feel how the Buddha and the arhats experience nirvana. The **joy** arising in us from such an exercise should be augmented by our constant cultivation of lovingkindness, which should further inspire us to be mindful of our breath for the sake of inner calm and clarity. Such exercises will keep up our mental health to expedite this inner journey to the path of awakening to nirvana.

Meantime, this joy will prevent our preconceptions and clear our views from getting the better of us, so that when we read the suttas, we are able to tease out their sense and taste a whiff of freedom as intended by the Buddha, or, at least, to keep us heading in that onward direction as we search the scriptures and as we present these texts and teachings for the benefit of others. Above all, we can notice how our views evolve—change and clarify—as we know the Dharma and make Dharma known.

**2.1.1.6** Even as a concept, nirvana is difficult to explain, even more so to think about. However, the sutta teachings about nirvana are clear enough. The difficulties in understanding nirvana often arise from our own preconceptions and predilections—trying to fit our view of nirvana into some concept we have been conditioned with—or not having a thorough or sufficient understanding of the suttas and their import.

In the English translations of the suttas, we usually see the sentences, “He attains nirvana,” or, more commonly, “He attains parinirvana.” In Pali, this is *nibbuti* (Skt *nirvṛtti*, literally, “He nirvana-s,” that is, attains nirvana) or, more commonly, *parinibbuti* (Skt *parinirvṛtti*, “He attains full nirvana”) [2.2.1.6].

Notice that *nibbuti* and *parinibbuti* are action nouns,<sup>17</sup> which are practically synonyms of *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna* respectively. While action words are often verbs referring to events, nouns express states, which are more or less “fixed” or stable things. However, a fundamental idea in early Buddhism is that there is neither any fixed nor stable state or “thing”: all things in this universe are conditioned (made up of interrelated parts) and, as such, impermanent. Hence, we need to use the word “state” here with some reservation, that is, it refers to an unconditioned state. We will return to this important point later [3.3.2].

**2.1.1.7** We find evidence, or at least, an occasion, for this new usage of *parinibbuta* [2.1.1.6] in the *Āṅguttara*. In **the (Chakka) Kimbila Sutta** (A 6.40), for example, we see the term “final nirvana” (*parinibbuta*) referring specifically to the Buddha’s passing away.<sup>18</sup> This same usage of *parinibbuta* is also found in **the (Sattaka) Kimbila Sutta** (A 7.56).<sup>19</sup> However, these Suttas (and a number of others like them) are simply reporting the passing away of the Buddha. Naturally, *parinibbuta* in these contexts refers specifically to the Buddha’s passing away.

However, the meaning of *parinibbāna* in the title, **the Maha,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16, SD 9), shows beyond doubt that it means “the final passing away” of the Buddha. As this is an important and popular text, it is not difficult to see how it may have influenced traditional Sinhala Buddhists, for example, to take *parinibbāna* (and its related forms, like *parinibbuta*) to refer specifically to an arhat’s final passing away, especially that of the Buddha.<sup>20</sup>

## **2.1.2 Consciousness**

**2.1.2.1** What divides samsara (our worldly existence of unsatisfactoriness) from nirvana is our consciousness. We are conscious of things depending on how we *think* or *feel*—basically motivated by greed, hate and delusion. How we think defines our consciousness: our consciousness define “us”; we are our consciousness. In this sense, as we think, so we are.<sup>21</sup>

Technically, samsara or the world (*loka*) refers to our 5 physical senses (*pañc’indriya*) and the mind—together known as the 6 sense-bases (*saḷ-āyatana*)—these are the bases for consciousness. Our consciousness is said to find their “footing” (*gādhati*) here, in these 6 sense-bases.<sup>22</sup> In other words, our consciousness must have its objects—it is conscious *of* them.<sup>23</sup>

As long as our consciousness finds a footing (advert to an object), we “exist,” get caught up in a maelstrom of sense-experiences: we live and feel unsatisfactoriness here and now. We are nothing but these 6 sense-bases, their external sense-objects, and their respective sense-consciousnesses. From the contacts (*phassa*) of the sense-bases and their respective objects and consciousnesses arise feelings, from which arise craving, and so on, leading on to suffering. This is our “**world**,” the virtual reality we create for ourself—this is the meaning of our life. Simply put, nirvana is the opposite of all this—the purpose of our life is to attain nirvana.

**2.1.2.2** The “world” (*loka*) is our person and personality—our body and mind. We can, for the sake of convenience, as a convention, simply refer to all this interactivity of body and mind as a “person.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See DP: *nibbuti*. Their adjs (mfn) are *nibbuta* and *parinibbuta* respectively. See also SD 50.13 (1.3.1.2).

<sup>18</sup> A 6.40/3:340 (SD 106.13).

<sup>19</sup> A 7.56/4:84 (SD 106.14)

<sup>20</sup> The best known account of this is given by Thomas 1947:294-295. See also Norman 1994:216.

<sup>21</sup> On consciousness and rebirth, see SD 48.1 (3.1.3).

<sup>22</sup> See, eg, **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,85.3), SD 1.7). On how this occurs, see **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a.

<sup>23</sup> On this aspect of consciousness, see **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (7).

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion, see **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b.



This “person” is the actor in samsara—the stage of our existential drama—full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Hence, linguistically at least, we are referring to people as “actors,” not to any entity in this samsaric drama. This understanding is helpful when we translate the Pali texts into English. When we refer to a *person* (such as the Buddha), we say that “He attains nirvana.” We use a verb (“attains”) that connects to the noun (“nirvana”). We must remember that in Pali, there is only the verb: “(He) nirvana-s,” with neither noun nor pronoun, without any concept of an abiding state—but only one that is impermanent and fluctuating.

When we speak of a person “attaining nirvana,” we are referring to his mind *changing*, becoming fully free from all defilements. In this sense, we say, “He attains nirvana.” But this is thinking and communicating in English: there is no such sentence in Pali. As we read the English sentence, we need to *think* in Pali, thus: “He nirvana-s.” This is the proper Pali idiom that gives the fuller Dharma sense: thus, we are guided by the early Buddhist spirit. This way we will not be trapped in wrong views on account of the language we use.

## 2.2 SOME KEY WORDS

Here we will examine the two key words—or rather, verbs—that describe what happens with nirvana, that is, the verbs *nibbāyati* [2.2.1] and *parinibbāyati* [2.2.2].

### 2.2.1 *Nibbāyati*

**2.2.1.1** There is only one verb that is used in the sense, “(he) attains nirvana,” that is, *parinibbāyati* (literally, “fully attains”) [2.2.2]. Although its sense overlaps with *nibbāyati*, this latter word and its various forms are not as common as *parinibbāyati* and its grammatical forms in the suttas. When it does occur, it usually refers to the going out or quenching of a fire (due to the lack of fuel) [2.3.2.4] or in a similar connection.

Cone’s *Dictionary of Pali* gives the following senses of *nibbāyati* (and its shorter form *nibbāti*, etc), with examples of references given in the footnotes:

- 1 (i) to cease to blow; cease to burn, goes out; becomes cool, cools; becomes calm, quiet;<sup>25</sup>  
(ii) is refreshed, delighted;<sup>26</sup>
- 2 becomes one in whom the fires (of passion, etc) cease to burn; becomes cool;<sup>27</sup>
- 3 ceases to burn, goes out (like a lamp or fire); ceases, dies (without the possibility of rebirth).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Nibbāyati* occurs thus in **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,17/1:188,21), SD 6.16; **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,-24.3/3:245,7), SD 4.17. See also Ap 427,1\* quenched after a meal of porridge, 1 hell cooled; B 2.92 hell cooled; J 2:235,5\*+8\* cold unresponsive feeling; Miln 96,7 great blaze quenched; Vism 272,7 palate cooled.

<sup>26</sup> *Nibbāyati* (1): (i) J 1:61,2, neg 285,12 *anibbāyanta*, mfn; (ii) D 3:85,12. Aor 3 sg *nibbāyi*: D 3,340,17, J 1:212,26, 6:349,8, Ap 143,21, B 2.175; 3 pl *nibbāyimsu*: Ap 403,5, Vism 430,17, ApA 55,32; abs *nibbāyitvā*: DhA 291,16.

<sup>27</sup> *Nibbāyati* (2) pres 3 sg: Sn 915 *kathaṃ disvā nibbāti bhikkhu*; Nm 1:344,1 f *attano rāgaṃ nibbāpeti dosaṃ nibbāpeti mohaṃ nibbāpeti*; Ap 87,16 *tava dhammaṃ suṇitvā nibbāyati bahujjano*.

<sup>28</sup> *Nibbāyati* (3): Th 919 *aharṃ jīvita,saṅkhāya ... nibbāyissam anāsavo*; ThaA 3:73,23 *nibbāyissāmi, anupādisesāya nibbānadhātuyā parinibbāyissāmīti attho*; Ap 100,19 *sakyaputto ... bodhayitvā bahū satte nibbāyissāti cakkhumā*, 196,3 *buddho ca loke nibbāti*, 459,2 *nibbāyissāmi anāsavo*, 488,16 *sikhī va anupādāno nibbāyissam anāsavo*, 536,34 *alam ettavatā vīra nibbāyissāmi nayaka*; also VA 576,21 f, UA 175,23. Past part: (a) *nibbāyanta* mfn: Ap 100,4; NA 2:6,29; (b) *nibbāyamāna* mfn: Ap 341,5. Aor 3 sg *nibbāyi*: Sn 354 *nibbāyi so ādu sa, upādiseso*; Ap 101,8; DhA 1:363,6; Mahv 5.226. 3 pl *nibbāyimsu*; Mahv 5.227; inf *nibbātum* Ap 531,18, Mahv 5.219. For other grammatical forms, see DP 2:582 f.

**2.2.1.2** The verb *nibbāyati* occurs in a more familiar form as *nibbāti*, “(one) goes out” (that is, attain nirvana), such as in **the Ratana Sutta** (Sn 2.1 = Khp 6), where it is said of those who awaken, the arhats, “the wise are quenched like this lamp” (*nibbanti dhīrā yathā’yam padīpo*, Sn 235 = Khp 6,14). [2.3.2.2]

**The Purisa,gati Sutta** (A 7.52) describes how a non-returner may attain nirvana in the intermediate state<sup>29</sup>—just as an iron bowl heated all day long is struck, and “a spark flies up and, upon landing, would be extinguished” (*papaṭikā nibbattivā uppativā nibbāyeyya*). The non-returner may also attain nirvana in the intermediate state in the same way.<sup>30</sup>

In **the Apadāna**, a late canonical work, too, we see *nibbāyati* used in reference to persons, to directly mean “attain nirvana,” in the sense of “awaken.”<sup>31</sup>

## **2.2.2 Parinibbāyati**

**2.2.2.1** We have already noted [2.2.1.2] that the verb *nibbāyati* means “to attain nirvana,” and that the more common verb with the same meaning is *parinibbāyati* (literally, “fully attains nirvana”)—simply meaning “attains full awakening”—and it occurs in all the 4 Nikāyas.<sup>32</sup> The verb *parinibbāyati* is resolved as (made up of) the prefix *pari-* (“all around, complete”) + (*nir-* “out,” + *√vā*, “to blow”) + *āya* (affix implying “doer”)<sup>33</sup> + *-ti* (inflectional ending for 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular).<sup>34</sup>

**2.2.2.2** There is a shorter form of *parinibbāyati*, that is, *parinibbāti*, which has very same sense, but which is less common than the former.<sup>35</sup>

## **2.2.3 Parinibbāna as the “final passing”**

**2.2.3.1** Sometimes (never as a rule), *parinibbāyati* is used in reference specifically to the final passing away of the Buddha or an arhat. This usage is famously found in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), where not only the title itself clearly refers to the Buddha’s passing, and where this usage occurs thrice.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> On the intermediate state, see **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17 (3+4); also SD 2.7 (1.2.2).

<sup>30</sup> A 75.52/4:70,20 (SD 82.10).

<sup>31</sup> Ap 3.35,9/87\*, 3.49,1/100\*, 3.175,2/188\*.

<sup>32</sup> *Parinibbāyati*: **Mahā,nidāna S** (D 15,32/2:68), SD 5.17; **Aggañña S** (D 27,40/3:97×4), SD 2.19; **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.20/2:109 + 4.38/2:134); **Cūḷa Sīha,nāda S** (M 11,17/1:67), SD 49.2; **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhāya S** (M 37,3/-1:251 f, 12/1:254, 15/1:255), SD 54.8; **Ghaṭikāra S** (M 81,18/2:52); **Aneñja,sappāya S** (M 106,10/2:265); **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,22.2/3:244 + 36/3:247), SD 4.17; **Parivimamsana S** (S 12.51/2:82), SD 11.5; **(Khandha) Anicca S 1** (S 22.137/3:45), SD 108.1; **Anicca S 2** (S 22.138/3:46), SD 108.2; **Upāya S** (S 22.53/3:54), SD 29.4; **(Viññāṇa) Bija S** (S 22.54/3:55), SD 8.3; **Udāna S** (S 22.55/3:58), SD 17.16; **Samugghāta Sārappa S** (S 35.30/4:23); **Samugghāta Sappāya S 1** (S 35.31/4:24); **Eja S 1** (S 35.90/4:66), SD 29.10; **Eja S 2** (S 35.91/4:67), SD 29.11; **Sakka Pañha S** (S 35.118/-4:102 f ×4), SD 74.1; **(Ugga) Vesālī S** (S 35.124/4:109 ×4), SD 74.17; **Nakula,pitu S** (S 35.131/4:116 ×4); **Udāyī S** (S 35.193/4:168); **Mūla S** (A 3.69/1:204 f ×5), SD 18.2; **(Tika) Āneñja S** (A 3.114/1:267 f ×3), SD 57.15; **(Tathāgata) Loka S** (A 4.23/2:24), SD 15.7(2.1.2) = It 4.13; **(Nānā,karaṇa) Puggala S 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128 ×4), SD 23.8a; **Mettā S 1** (A 4.125/2:129×2), SD 33.9; **Pacalā S** (A 7.58/4:88), SD 4.11; **Bhūmi,cāla S** (A 8.70/4:313) = D 16,3.13-20; **Cunda Kammāra,putta S** (U 8.5/85); **(Tathāgata) Loka S** (It 4.13/121) = A 4.23, SD 15.17; **Kathā,vatthu** (Kvu 614, 615×3, 621×2 uddāna); Nc 82, 156. For full list, see PTC sv parinibbāyi.

<sup>33</sup> *Kaccāyana Pāli Grammar* (ed A Thitzana), 2016 1:310, 2:623 (sutta 435).

<sup>34</sup> For etymology, see PED: nibbāna.

<sup>35</sup> The PTC lists the foll occurrences of *parinibbāti*: **V** 2:148, 164; **D** 2:104-106, 112 f, 266, 3:61; **M** 1:45, 2:102; **S** 4:128, 5:260; **A** 1:168, 2:68; 3:41, 43, 46, 347, 4:45, 98, 310; **Dh** 126; **U** 63 f; **It** 93, 95; **Tha** 100, 364, 369, 576, 658, 672, 704 1017; **J** 4:127; **Nm** 32; **Nc** 245, 269, 276; **Pm** 1:131; **Ap** 532, 535; **B** 66; **Vbh** 426; **Yam** 1:25, 28, 35 ff, 37 ff, 104 ff, 121 ff, 128, 131, 139, 140, 159, 102 ff, 133, 245, 2:177 ff.

<sup>36</sup> D 16,3.20/2:108, 4.37/2:134, 4.42/2:136 (SD 9).

It is probably based on the usage of *parinibbāyati*—as referring to the Buddha’s passing away—that we have the popular but erroneous modern usage of *parinibbāna* as meaning the Buddha “final passing away.”

**2.2.3.2** The oldest Pali texts<sup>37</sup> mention two aspects of *nibbāna* and *parinibbāna*, where both terms are synonyms. However, partly due to the usage of *parinibbāna* in the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta [2.2.3.1], where it describes the Buddha’s final passing away or “final nirvana,” the term *parinibbāna* is often taken to mean the “death” or “final passing-away” of the Buddha or an arhat.<sup>38</sup>

The Pali-English Dictionary (PED) perpetuates this error.<sup>39</sup> **E J Thomas**, in his two-page article, “Nirvāṇa and Parinirvāṇa,” in *India Antiqua*, remarks that “Even the Buddhists of Ceylon have the same idea [that *parinibbāna* means final *nibbāna* or *nibbāna* attained at death with the complete dispersal of the *skandhas*], probably because they follow Rhys Davids [ie, the Pali Text Society’s *Pali-English Dictionary*] more closely than the Pali texts” (1947:294 f).<sup>40</sup>

It is unlikely that the PED started the misconception, but it clearly perpetuated it. Surely, the Sinhala Buddhists had been aware of this meaning of *parinibbāna* in the title, Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta—with which they are very familiar—for centuries before. This misconception, or rather, inaccuracy, in the usage or understanding of the term *parinibbāna* and its related verbs, *parinibbāyati*, etc, is widespread amongst ethnic Buddhists of southeast Asia, too.

## **2.2.4 Other senses of *parinibbāyati***

**2.2.4.1** The usage of the term *parinibbāyati* as meaning “pass away (into final nirvana)” (of the Buddha or an arhat) [2.2.3.2] is also found in **the Pāsādika Sutta** (D 29), where the Buddha tells Cunda Samaṇ’uddesa about the 2 kinds of nirvana of the Buddha, the second which he “passes finally away into nirvana” (*parinibbāyati*), and again of the non-returning’s attaining nirvana in the pure abodes [2.2.4.2], using the same term.<sup>41</sup> The Sutta, however, does not in any way suggest that this is the only sense of the term.

**2.2.4.2** In **the Mahā Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 73), the Buddha uses the same term to describe the final nirvana of a non-returner in the pure abodes, that is, “having exterminated the 5 lower fetters,<sup>42</sup> who spontaneously arises (in the pure abodes),<sup>43</sup> therein attains nirvana (*tattha,parinibbāyi*), and of a

<sup>37</sup> Cf DhA 2:163.

<sup>38</sup> K R Norman, “Mistaken Ideas about *Nibbāna*,” 1995:216.

<sup>39</sup> PED 427, sv Parinibbāna.

<sup>40</sup> See also E J Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, 1951:121 n4; R Gombrich, *Precepts and Practice*, Oxford, 1971:70 n14. Also SD 9 (15).

<sup>41</sup> D 29,25(3)/3:132 + 29.2/3:135 (SD 40a.6).

<sup>42</sup> **The 10 fetters** (*dasa saṃyojana*) are: (1) self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), (2) spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), (3) attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), (4) sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), (5) repulsion (*paṭigha*), (6) greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), (7) greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), (8) conceit (*māna*), (9) restlessness (*uddhacca*), (10) ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61; A 5:13; Vbh 377). In some places, no 5 (*kāma,rāga*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*orambhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddhambhāgiya*). The abandonment of the lower 5 fetters makes one a non-returner (*opapātika* or *anāgāmī*) (see **Ānāpānasati S**, M 118,10), SD 7.13. This verse technically refers to the non-returner, but here is spoken of an arhat, one who has broken all 10 fetters: see **Laṭṭukikōpama S** (M 66,17/1:454), SD 28.11.

<sup>43</sup> The pure abodes (*suddh’āvāsa*) are the 5 highest heavens of the form world (*rūpa,loka*) inhabited only by non-returners who assume their last birth and attain nirvana as arhats (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). The 5 pure abodes, ie their inhabitants and respective lifespans, are: These worlds are Āviha (“Non-declining,” 1000 MK), Ātappa (“Unworried,” 2000 MK), Sudassā (“Clearly Visible,” 4000 MK), Sudassī (“Clear-visioned,” 8000 MK) and

nature not to return from that world.”<sup>44</sup> However, here, it does not mean that the non-returner dies, but only that he becomes an arhat and continues to live until his natural death in that pure abode.  
[2.2.4.1]

**2.2.4.3** In the **Bhaddāli Sutta** (M 65), *parinibbāyati* is used a special sense, meaning “becomes pacified,” in reference to the training of a thoroughbred horse.<sup>45</sup> Its Commentary glosses *parinibbāyati* as “(of a horse being tamed) it gives up self-indulgence and becomes docile” (*nibbisevano hoti taṃ visevanam jahatīti attho*, MA 3:158).

It is likely that the pre-Buddhist sense of *parinibbāyati* is closely related to “being cool, becoming cool or cold” and “becoming calm or pacified,” as suggested by its usage in the Bhaddāli Sutta. In other words, the Bhaddāli Sutta probably preserves one of the oldest usages—if not *the* oldest usage—of the term *parinibbāyati*.

## 2.3 A PSYCHOLOGY OF NIRVANA

### 2.3.1 How nirvana is “permanent”

**2.3.1.1** We may say that a “person” changes, but “nirvana” does not. Nirvana is *not* a changing state—it is beyond time and space [2.3.1.2]. Yet, in English, it helps our understanding to *refer* to nirvana as a “state,” even as an “eternal state” or “abiding state.” The reason is simple: once we attain nirvana (“we nirvana”), we do not fall out of it. It is permanent or forever, so to speak. In this sense, it is a kind of “stateless state.”

**2.3.1.2** Nirvana is not an “entity,” not a “thing” (what is made up of the 4 elements, or conditioned, like our body). In this sense, nirvana is *not* even a “state,” but because it is beyond time and space, we say that it is “permanent” or “forever”—in the sense that it does not change and we do not fall away from it once we have attained it. It is important to see language as a means of referring or pointing to nirvana but not *defining* nirvana itself. Neither the word or the words are the thing.<sup>46</sup>

### 2.3.2 Nirvana as extinction

**2.3.2.1** The Pali of the early suttas primarily refers to nirvana as an event or process of the “going out” of the “fires” of greed, hate and delusion.<sup>47</sup> Once the Buddha fully understands suffering, its arising, the path leading to its ending, and its ending (nirvana),<sup>48</sup> these fires are extinguished. This process is the same for all who awaken—the arhats.<sup>49</sup> The early texts call this either “nirvana” or “parinirvana,” the complete “blowing out” or “extinguishing” of the “fires” of greed, hate and delusion.

Akaṇiṭṭhā (“Highest,” 16000 MK) (D 3:237, M 3:103, Vbh 425, Pug 42-46). MK = *Mahā Kappa*, ie, a full cycle of a world-period or cycle of the universe (V 3:4 = D 3:51, 111 = It 99; D 1:14; A 2:142). For celestial map, see **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11/1:211-223), SD 1.7; for world cycle, see **Aggañña S** (D 27/3:80-97), SD 2.19.

<sup>44</sup> M 73,9 (SD 27.4).

<sup>45</sup> M 65,33/1:446×3 (SD 56.2).

<sup>46</sup> The usual saying is “The word is not the thing.” See SD 17.4 (4); also SD 17.2a (12.1).

<sup>47</sup> On nirvana as the extinguishing of the 3 fires (greed, hate, delusion), see (**Jambu, khādaka**) **Nibbāna Pañha S** (S 38.1/4:251), (**Sāmaṇḍaka**) **Nibbāna Pañha S** (S 39.1/4:261); also **Āditta Pariyāya S** (S 35.28,4-8) + SD 1.3. See DEB: aggi 3 (1).

<sup>48</sup> The 4 noble truths are here listed in practical terms, as 1-2-4-3, unlike the well known sequence of these 4 truths: see SD 1.1 (6.2.2.2); **Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika S** (M 149,11 etc) + SD 41.9 (2.4).

<sup>49</sup> On the awakening of the Buddha and the arhats, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

In this sense, nirvana is not a “thing” but an event [3.1] or experience [3.2]. There is a subtle but significant difference between nirvana as an event and as an experience, and also as a state [3.3]—we will examine this further below. In such discussions, we must remind ourselves that *the language used is only provisional*—sign-posts pointing to the truth beyond words. We are trying to describe an ineffable experience. Only in making the journey ourselves, and arriving at this sublime goal, will we truly feel and understand it.<sup>50</sup>

**2.3.2.2** The older texts compare nirvana to a fire “going out” rather than a fire being “put out,” the sense taken in later texts. These late passages describe nirvana as follows:

<b>Ratana Sutta</b>	<i>nibbanti dhīrā yathā’yam padīpo,</i> “the wise are quenched like a lamp” [2.2.1.2]	Sn 235 = Khp 6,14
<b>Milinda,pañha</b>	<i>aggi-k,khandho nibbuto hoti</i> “the great blazing mass has gone out” <i>mahā,meghena nibbutam,</i> “cooled by a great rain-cloud” <i>param’attha,nibbāna,sukha,sampatti,</i> “accomplished in the ultimate happiness that is nirvana”	Miln 304 Miln 346 Miln 410
<b>Vaṭṭaka Jātaka</b>	<i>dāv’aggi,nibbānam,</i> “the going out of a forest-fire” <i>udake opilāpatita,tīṇ’ukkā viya nibbāyi,</i> “extinguished like a grass-torch plunged into water”	J 35/1:212 J 35/1:212
<b>Sn Commentary</b>	<i>channā’ti tiṇa,pañṇa-c,chadanehi anovassakatā,</i> “‘covered,’ meaning sheltered from the rain by a covering of grass and leaves”	SnA 28

These late passages seem to suggest that nirvana could be attained by a wilful act,<sup>51</sup> that we are making it happen, that we are creating nirvana—that we are bringing *it* into being, that we are destroying the defilements. There is neither the “it” nor the “we,” there is only the extinguishing of the defilements.<sup>52</sup>

**2.3.2.3** In the older suttas, however, nirvana is always shown, as it were, to arise on its own accord: we can only create the right conditions (that is, living the moral life, cultivating the mind, and seeing true reality with wisdom). Under such right conditions, nirvana arises when all is cool, after the fires of defilements have gone out. [2.3.2.1]

Here are some examples from the early suttas where nirvana is used in the apophatic (“negative”) sense [3.3.1.1] of fire “going out”:

**Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72):

“a fire gone out through lack of fuel” (*aggi anāhāro nibbuto*) (M 72/1:487), SD 6.15;

“the fire would go out” (*aggi nibbāyeyya*, M 72/1:487), SD 6.15;

**Saṅgha Vandanā Sutta** (S 11.20):

“amongst the violent, they are quenched; amongst those who grasp, they do not”

(*atta,daṇḍesu nibbuto s’ādānesu anādāno*, S 11.20/1:236), SD 86.4;

**Upādāna Sutta** (S 12.52): “one would go out like a fire, from lack of food, because the former fuel is exhausted, without any new supply”

(*aggi-k,khandho purimassa upādānassa pariyādānā aññassa ca anupāhārā anāhāro nibbāyeyya*, S 12.52/2:85);

<sup>50</sup> For a study on spiritual silence, see **Silence and the Buddha**, SD 44.1 (4).

<sup>51</sup> On the spiritual path as a “non-wilful” act, see (**Ekā,dasaka**) **Cetanā’karaṇīya S** (A 11.2), SD 33.3b.

<sup>52</sup> See SD 10.16 (1.7.1.2).

**Dhammapada:** “a meditator, gone beyond, without fuel, attained nirvana [cool]”  
(*pāragato jhāyī ... anupādāya nibbuto*) (Dh 414ce);

**Dhaniya Sutta** (Sn 1.2): “the fire has gone out” (*nibbuto gini*, Sn 1.2/19), SD 50.20.

**2.3.2.4** In “positive” or affirmative language—which refers to the what happens to the mind in a living arhat (including the Buddha)—we can describe nirvana as **the absence of any clinging (*upādāna*)**, it is free from any fuel (*upādāna*) that feeds it in any way, as shown in these passages:<sup>53</sup>

**Sakka,pañha Sutta** (S 35.118):

“a monk with clinging, O lord of the gods, does not attain nirvana”

(*sa, upādāno devānaṃ inda bhikkhu na parinibbāyayi*, S 35.118/4:102), SD 74.1;

**(Dāna) Vaccha, gotta Sutta** (A 3.57):

“who has gone beyond all things, and by non-clinging attained nirvana”

(*pāragū sabba, dhammānaṃ anupādāya nibbuto*, A 3.57/1:162), SD 22.12;

**Kappa Māṇava Pucchā** (Sn 5.11):

“This island, free of things, free of grasping, without par, is called ‘nirvana’”

(*akiñcanaṃ anādānaṃ etaṃ dīpaṃ anāparaṃ nibbānaṃ iti*, Sn 5.11/1094\*).

### 3 The 4 key usages of the term *nibbāna*

#### 3.0 DIMENSIONS OF THE NIRVANA CONCEPT

It helps to distinguish the different dimensions of the usages of the term *nibbāna* (Skt *nirvāṇa*) in early Buddhism.<sup>54</sup> We shall here examine the concept of nirvana in 4 dimensions or ways of “looking at” nirvana:

- |                          |                                    |   |       |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---|-------|
| (1) the ontological:     | nirvana as an <u>event</u> ,       | that is, what <i>happens</i> when we awaken         | [3.1] |
| (2) the epistemological: | nirvana as an <u>experience</u> ,  | that is, what we <i>know</i> when we awaken         | [3.2] |
| (3) the cosmological:    | nirvana as a <u>state</u>          | enjoyed by the Buddha and arhats <i>after death</i> | [3.3] |
| (4) the soteriological:  | nirvana as <u>the final goal</u> , | when all things “cease to be.”                      | [3.4] |

#### 3.1 NIRVANA AS AN EVENT (THE ONTOLOGICAL DIMENSION)

##### 3.1.1 Meanings of *nibbāna*

**3.1.1.1** How can we understand of the concept of nirvana an experience or an event: what makes an awakened person? This is **the ontological dimension**—that is: “What happens when one attains nirvana?” and “What is it like being in nirvana?” The simple answer is: one is freed from suffering, or, better, one of completely “free.” [3.1.2.1]

**3.1.1.2** *Nibbāna* literally means “blowing out” or “extinguishing” (of a flame): *nibbāna* = *ni* (“out”) + *vvā*, “to blow.” Technically, this is not the blowing out of a person, a being, the self or the soul—there is

<sup>53</sup> On *upādāna* as “fuel,” see SD 3.7 (5).

<sup>54</sup> See Gethin 1998:74-79.

none of these to be blown out in the first place!<sup>55</sup> It is the “blowing out” of the 3 karmic roots of lust (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). This is the most common definition that we see in the suttas.<sup>56</sup>

**3.1.1.3** In the suttas, the term nirvana is sometimes, but less commonly, explained as “the absence of craving,” such as in **the Atta,daṇḍa Sutta** (Sn 940). However, in the Commentaries, nirvana is often defined as “the absence of craving,” sometimes by wordplay. For example, nirvana is

- “... called ‘extinction’ because of the overcoming of craving termed ‘fastening [weaving]’ (*vāna*) as the fastening to the 5 kinds of destination” (KhpA 1:152),<sup>57</sup> and
- “Craving is called ‘a jungle’ (*vāna*); it is nirvana because it has got out (*nikkhantam*) of the jungle, or since it is here that there is no jungle, or else there is an absence of such jungle when it is attained” (ItA 1:164).<sup>58</sup>

Often, *nibbāna* is taken as a variant reading for *nibbana* (literally, “without forest, woodless,” KhpA 151,26; J 3:358), “without craving” (*nikkāmo nibbano*, Sn 1131; *nibbanā*, plural, Dh 283).<sup>59</sup> Here, “forest” is a metaphor for craving or sensual desire.<sup>60</sup>

### **3.1.2 Usages of the term *nibbāna***

**3.1.2.1** When the Bodhisattva awakens as the Buddha, he declares, in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), “I realized nirvana” (*nibbanam ajjhagamam*) [3.1.2.2]. In the case of the Buddha’s disciples, when they awaken, that is, attain arhathood, this event is usually denoted in the suttas by a pericope or stock passage known as the “arhat’s review knowledge,”<sup>61</sup> which runs thus:

“Through revulsion,	he becomes dispassionate.
Through dispassion,	he is free.
Freed,	there arises the knowledge: ‘Free!’ [3.1.2.2]

He understands:  
 ‘Destroyed is birth.  
 The holy life has been lived.  
 What needs to be done has been done.  
 There is no more of this state of being.’” (Eg, **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,22.2), SD 1.2)

**3.1.2.2** Of special interest in the arhat’s review knowledge pericope [3.1.2.1] is the third line—“Freed, there arises the knowledge, ‘Free!’” (*vimuttismim vimuttam iti ñāṇam hoti*). Paraphrased, this

<sup>55</sup> See **Is there a soul?** SD 2.16.

<sup>56</sup> See, eg, V 1:5,3; D 2:42,10, 251,34, 290,10, 3:251,4; M 1:73,36, 163,1, 493,26 f; S 1:39,21\*, 199,34\*, 2:117,14, 4:251,20, 252,4, 5:80,5; A 1:8,9, 159,7; Dh 23, 369; U 15,14; Sn 940; Vv 50,21; Tha 138; Thī 157; Pm 1:15,4 f, 2:238,17 f; Ap 41,10, 337,18; B 2.11; Nc:Be 227; Dhs 1367, 1416. For details, see DP: *nibbāna*.

<sup>57</sup> *Tam pi hi pañca,gati,vānena vāna,saññitāya taṇhāya nikkhanatattā nibbānan’ti vuccati*, KhpA 1:152,22 f (KhpA:Ñ 166). For the 5 kinds of destinations—the hells (*niraya*), animals (*tiracchāna*), the realm of the departed (*petti,visaya*), human beings (*manussa*), and gods (*deva*): **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,35/1:73-76), SD 49.1; also **(Pañca) Gati S** (A 9.58), SD 2.20.

<sup>58</sup> *Vānaṃ vuccati taṇhā, nikkhantaṃ vānato,n’atthi ettha vānaṃ, imasmim vā adhigate vānassa abhāvo’ti nibbānaṃ*, ItA 1:164,33 (ItA:M 1:407+n2).

<sup>59</sup> For Buddhaghosa’s defs of the term *nibbāna*, see Vism 293. See PED & DP: *nibbāna* & *nibbana*.

<sup>60</sup> See SD 50.2 (1.1.4.4).

<sup>61</sup> See eg **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,22), SD 1.2.

line means: “When free, there is the knowledge, it (the mind) is free.” Note that the key sentence, “Free!” (*vimuttam-iti*) has no subject. No self is addressed here.

What is liberated here is not the “self,” since there is no self: indeed, we can say that we are liberated from the notion or phantom of a “self.” In the suttas, the “self” (*attā*) often refers to the mind.<sup>62</sup> We can rightly say that it is the mind that is liberated. This means that our mind is neither fettered nor fired up by the 3 fiery roots of karmic motivation: greed, hate and delusion. [3.1.2.2; 3.2.1.1]

The sentence “Free!” is the best word we can use to refer to or describe nirvana in linguistic terms. It is the transcendental response to the first taste of true spiritual freedom, of nirvana. In a single word, we have all the dimensions, as it were, of the unconditioned, nirvana [3.3.2]. Significantly, this is **the shortest sentence** in all religious literature and in the history of religion.

**3.1.2.3** Other than the arhat’s review knowledge pericope [3.1.2.1], the disciple’s attaining of nirvana is denoted in the suttas, for example, in these ways:

[S = Sutta]

<b>Saṅgīti Sutta</b>	D 33,2.2(21)	<i>nibbānaṃ abhijāyati</i> , <sup>63</sup>	“he obtains nirvana” <sup>64</sup>	
<b>Ariya Pariyesanā S (Paribbājaka) Māgandiya Sutta</b>	M 26,18.6	<i>nibbānaṃ ajjhagamāṃ</i> , <sup>65</sup>	“I realized nirvana”	SD 1.11
<b>Mahā Vaccha,gotta S</b>	M 75,22	<i>nibbānaṃ passeyya</i> , <sup>66</sup>	“might see nirvana”	SD 31.5
<b>Gaṇaka Moggallāna S (Avijjā) Sūka Sutta</b>	M 73,14	<i>nibbānaṃ āhacca</i> , <sup>67</sup>	“reaches nirvana” (fig)	SD 27.4
<b>Vaccha,gotta Sutta</b>	M 107,12	<i>nibbānaṃ ārādhenti</i> , <sup>68</sup>	“they win nirvana”	SD 56.3
<b>Sukhumāla Sutta</b>	S 45.9	<i>nibbānaṃ sacchi,karoti</i> , <sup>69</sup>	“he himself experiences nirvana” <sup>70</sup>	
<b>Paṭisambhidā</b>	A 3.57	<i>nibbānaṃ adhigacchanti</i> , <sup>71</sup>	“they realize nirvana” <sup>72</sup>	SD 22.12
	A 3.38	<i>nibbānaṃ abhipassato</i> , <sup>73</sup>	“(I) clearly saw nirvana” <sup>74</sup>	SD 63.7
	Pm 2:66	<i>nibbānaṃ niyyāti</i> , <sup>75</sup>	“led out into nirvana.”	

### 3.2 NIRVANA AS AN EXPERIENCE (THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIMENSION)

#### 3.2.1 Two kinds of nirvana

**3.2.1.1** What can we know of nirvana? How do we experience it? This is **the epistemological dimension**—how do we experience or know nirvana. After a person has attained nirvana, his mind is free from

<sup>62</sup> On the self as the mind, see SD 26.9 (1.6.2, 2.1.2).

<sup>63</sup> *Abhijāyati*, 3 pres sg (passive of VJAN, to give birth, be born), to be fit to be or become.

<sup>64</sup> This is a non-Buddhist usage, such as by the 6 heterodox teachers. Also in **Cha-Ī-ābhijāti S** (A 6.57), SD 23.5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ajjhagamāṃ*, 1 aor sg (M 1:167,27) of *adhigacchati*, “attains, understands”; cf *ajjhagamāṃsu* (M 1:173,11), 3 aor pl of *adhigacchati*: see below (A 3.57).

<sup>66</sup> *Passeyya* (M 1:510), pot of *passati*, “to see.”

<sup>67</sup> *Āhacca* (M 1:493, 3:139), abs of *āhanati*, “to touch.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ārādhenti* (M 3:4), 3 pl of *ārādhenti* or *ārādhayati* (caus), “to accomplish, achieve.” Also at Nm 1:33; Nc:Be 95.

<sup>69</sup> *Sacchi,karoti* = *sacchi* (sa, “with” + *akṣ* (Skt), as in *akkhi*, “the eye”) + *karoti*, “to do, act,” ie, personally experiences (nirvana).

<sup>70</sup> Also (**Paṇihita**) **Sūka S** (S 45.154); (**Ekaka**) **Paṇihita Sūka S 1+2** (A 1.5.1 + 2); **Saṅgaṇīk’ārāma S** (A 6.68).

<sup>71</sup> *Adhigacchanti*, 3 pres pl of *adhigacchati*, “(one) attains, understands”: see above (M 26,30).

<sup>72</sup> Also in **Gihī S** (A 5.179/3:214), SD 70.10; *nibbānaṃ nādhigacchāmi*, “I did not attain nirvana,” **Paṭācārā Thī** (Thī 113).

<sup>73</sup> *Abhipassato* (*abhi*, “higher, special, clearly,” + *passato*, “who sees”) (A 1:147,16\*; cf Sn 896) adj (mfn) of *passati*, “he sees.”

<sup>74</sup> Also in **Abhiṇha,paccavekkhitabba,ṭhāna S** (A 5.57/3:75), SD 5.12.

<sup>75</sup> *Niyyāti* (Pm 2:66,1) also *nīyatī* and *niyyāyati*, “leaves (samsara); goes forth (into nirvana).”



the karmic roots of greed, hatred and delusion, since they have been fully “uprooted.” The attaining of *arhathood*—which is the same as attaining *nirvana*—is described by this stock passage, thus: “Having cut them off at the root, made them like a palm-tree stump, done away with them so that they are not subject to further growth.”<sup>76</sup> What does this mean?

**3.2.1.2** The Buddha, after attaining nirvana, does not dwell absorbed in some eternal profound mental state, cut off from the world. On the contrary, the Buddha continues to live in the world. In a sense, he continues to think, speak and act just as we do. However, all these thoughts, words and deeds are fully free from the karmic motivations of greed, hate and delusion. Instead, he is moved entirely by charity, love<sup>77</sup> and wisdom.

**3.2.1.3** This extinguishing of the defilements (*kilesa*) by an arhat is termed “nirvana with remainder (of life)” (*sa, upādi, sesa nibbāna*). This is the nirvana that comes from the destruction of the mental defilements. The Pali Commentaries have a short name for it: the “**nirvana of the defilements**” (*kilesa, -parinibbāna*).<sup>78</sup> This is what the Buddha attains on the night of his awakening.

**3.2.1.4** The “remainder (of life)” (*upādi, sesa*)—these are the 5 aggregates<sup>79</sup>—will, in due course, be exhausted. Even an arhat, like any being, must die. But, unlike other beings—those who have not reached nirvana—the arhat will not be reborn into any new life. The arhat has neither physical nor mental constituents of being that can, in combination or by itself, come into some new existence, whether as a human or some higher being.

The arhat is not reborn: he “attains parinirvana,” meaning that the 5 aggregates of physical and mental phenomena comprising a being have all ceased. This is the “nirvana without remainder (of life)” (*anupādi, sesa nibbāna*). This is, for short, “**the nirvana of the aggregates**” (*khandha, parinibbāna*).<sup>80</sup>

### 3.3 NIRVANA AS A STATE (THE COSMOLOGICAL DIMENSION)

#### 3.3.1 A cosmological perspective of nirvana

**3.3.1.1** So far, we have examined the concept [2.1.1] of nirvana from the perspective of a particular experience which has far-reaching but quite specific effects. This is the more straightforward aspect of the early Buddhist teaching on nirvana. There is, however, a further dimension to this treatment and understanding of nirvana. This is the posthumous state of the Buddha and the arhat—the nirvana in which, as it were, they now abide forever.

How do we explain the posthumous state of an awakened person who has passed away? As we have noted, despite the Buddha’s advice against such speculations [3.4.2], our worldly curiosity gets the better of us, and we go out of the way to speculate the nature of the “dead” Buddha. [2.1.1.1]

<sup>76</sup> *Ucchinna, mūlā tālā, vatthu, katā anabhāvaṃ, katā āyatirā anuppāda, dhammā*. For refs, see **Naḷaka, pāna S** (M 68,7.3 n), SD 37.4.

<sup>77</sup> It is clear from the context that such usage of “love” refers to *mettā*, otherwise tr as “lovingkindness.”

<sup>78</sup> DhA 2:163; VbhA 433.

<sup>79</sup> Technically, these are simply “the 5 aggregates” (*pañca-k, khandha*) (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) free from all clinging: see (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56) SD 3.7 (2); **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28,27-28) SD 6.16 = SD 17.8a (13.2.2). Those of the unawakened are called “the 5 aggregates of clinging” (*pañc’u-pādāna-k, khandha*): see (**Upādāna**) **Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56) SD 3.7; defined at SD 3.7 (6+7).

<sup>80</sup> DhA 2:163; VbhA 433.

If we do try to explain the posthumous state of the Buddha or an arhat, we can only do so apophatically, in a negative sense—by what he is *not*.<sup>81</sup> The “nirvana-ed” Buddha or arhat is no more part of this or any world.

Furthermore, as we have noted, nirvana is not located anywhere; it is beyond time and space [3.3.2]. Hence, it makes no sense to speak of a “nirvana-ed” saint as being located *anywhere* or *anywhen*. This is **the cosmological dimension**—a time-space conception—of our understanding of nirvana.

**3.3.1.2** What exactly does the mind experience when the fires of greed, hatred and delusion are fully and finally extinguished? According to some Abhidharma traditions, at the moment of awakening, with the quenching of the fires of greed, hate and delusion, the mind knows nirvana directly. In the Abhidharma terminology, nirvana can be said to be the object of consciousness at the *moment* of awakening when it sees the 4 noble truths.<sup>82</sup>

**3.3.1.3** At the moment of full awakening, all craving and attachments are abandoned—it is as if we have awoken from a troubled sleep into the light of a peaceful and beautiful dawn, and realize that we are on an extended holiday, with nothing that we need to do except what we feel like doing as the occasion arises.

When we fully awaken, however, we also fully and clearly see the most profound truth and ultimate reality of all things. This is not “nothing”—not merely *no* greed, *no* hate, *no* delusion—but of what the suttas call the “unconditioned.”

### **3.3.2 The non-conditioned**

**3.3.2.1** Nirvana is not conditioned in anyway; hence, it is said to be “non-conditioned” or “unconditioned.” What is or are the meanings of “**unconditioned**” and “**non-conditioned**”<sup>83</sup> (*asaṅkhata*)? In the English idiom, unconditioned means “not conditioned” contra what is *conditioned*; while non-conditioned means “nothing to do with conditions,” which is a better description of the concept of nirvana.<sup>84</sup> We are here trying to describe what nirvana is conceptually like as “existence”—the **ontological** problem.

**3.3.2.2** The Udāna gives us some very interesting insights into the nature of nirvana in ontological terms, as presented in **the Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1** (U 8.1), thus:

There is, bhikshus, that place where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind; no base of boundless space; no base of boundless consciousness; no base of nothingness; no base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; neither this world nor other worlds; without both the moon and the sun.

Therein, bhikshus, I say, there is neither coming nor going nor standing; neither death nor birth; neither the established nor the occurring; nor even this sense-object.

This, indeed, is the very end of suffering. (U 8.1/80), SD 50.1

Notice that this passage nirvana cannot be described in terms of matter (the 4 primary elements), nor in terms of space (the formless states; worlds), nor in terms of time (the moon and the sun). In short, is beyond any space-time continuum.

<sup>81</sup> On apophasis or negative language, see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

<sup>82</sup> L S Cousins, “Nibbāna and Abhidhamma,” 1984:77-79.

<sup>83</sup> On this translation, see SD 50.3 (1.1.2).

<sup>84</sup> Using negative language in this way is called **apophasis**: see SD 50.3 (1.1.2).

However, nowhere in the suttas is nirvana ever described as “not existing” (which is a wrong view rooted in the wrong view of annihilationism)<sup>85</sup>—saying that something “does not exist” is to contrast it with a concept of something that it *had* existed before and is now no more, or with the notion of something that is clearly false or unreal.

**3.3.2.3** This key passage from the Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta 1 (U 8.1) refers to **the 4 elements** that constitute the physical world and the progressively subtle forms of **consciousness** that are “bases or spheres” (*āyatana*) of existence and experience of which nirvana is no part. These spheres or realms are conditioned by time and space—the impermanent and shifting cycles of rebirth and redeath, or samsara (*saṃsāra*). In contrast to samsara, nirvana is said to be “unconditioned” (*asaṅkhata*) or the “unconditioned realm” (*asaṅkhata,dhatu*).

**3.3.2.4** The term *asaṅkhata* sometimes occurs on its own in the suttas. The best known occurrence is in **the Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta** (S 43), where it is defined as *the destruction of greed, hate and delusion*.<sup>86</sup> This is, of course, an allusion to nirvana, and is a clear reference to the third noble truth—that of the ending of suffering, namely, nirvana.

**3.3.2.5 The Saṅkhatāsaṅkhata Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (A 3.47) explains the 3 unconditioned characteristics of the unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) as that, in the unconditioned,

- (1) arising is not known,
- (2) ceasing is not known, and
- (3) alteration of what is present is not known.

These are opposed to the counterpart characteristics of the conditioned, that is, what is arising, ceasing and changing.<sup>87</sup>

**3.3.2.6 In the Cūḷa Vedalla Sutta** (M 44), the noble eightfold path is stated as being *conditioned*,<sup>88</sup> insofar as those still walking the path, beginning with the streamwinners up to the arhat-to-be, have yet to attain nirvana. **The (Catukka) Agga-p,pasāda Sutta** (A 4.34), however, declares that the eightfold path is *the highest* of the conditioned states, but nirvana (along with its synonyms) is declared to be *the highest* when the conditioned and the unconditioned are taken together.<sup>89</sup>

**3.3.2.7** More frequent, however, is the verbal form of *saṅkhata*, that is, *saṅkhāra*, often translated as “formations.” A *saṅkhāra* is “an activity which enables something to come into existence or to maintain its existence—it fashions or forms things ... especially by volition” (Cousins 1984:74). This is, of course a reference to the second link of dependent arising. The ensuing links are said to be “conditioned” (*saṅkhata*), fashioned by volitional activity (from this or a previous life). All this also amounts to the 5 aggregates, the whole mind-body complex. [3.5.1.2 f]

<sup>85</sup> See SD 40a.1 (10.2.1.1).

<sup>86</sup> S 43/4:359-368.

<sup>87</sup> A 3.47/1:152 (SD 33.11).

<sup>88</sup> M 44,10/1:300 (SD 40a.9).

<sup>89</sup> A 4.34,2.1/2:34 (SD 45.13).

### 3.4 NIRVANA AS THE FINAL GOAL (THE SOTERIOLOGICAL DIMENSION)

#### 3.4.1 The final question

**3.4.1.1** We have, thus far, discussed and described the idea of **nirvana** as follows:

- (1) **ontology**: it is the extinguishing of the karmic roots or “fires” of greed, hate and delusion; [3.1]
- (2) **epistemology**: it is the unconditioned state realized at the very moment of awakening [3.2]; and
- (3) **cosmological**: it is beyond time and space [3.3].

Now, we will discuss the 4<sup>th</sup> and last way of describing nirvana:

- (4) **soteriological**: it is our final goal and the end of the world as we know it [3.4].

**3.4.1.2** This fourth viewpoint is our understanding of nirvana as the final state of the Buddha and the arhats in life and after death. Technically, we can say that awakening (*bodhi*) and nirvana (*nibbāna*) refer to the same thing: fully liberation from suffering. While “awakening” is the experience of freedom from suffering while the Buddha or the arhat lives, “nirvana” describes his state after death. [2.3.2.1]

Now, we have a critical question: **What is the posthumous state of those fully awakened?** (Yes, again we have disobeyed the Buddha’s advice not to speculate on the after-death state of the saint [2.1.1.1].) Our best reason for this is that, in an age where it is vogue to question anything and everything, we are working to understand how we think so that we no more want or need to speculate about such matters.

**3.4.1.3** Technically, we call this **the eschatological dimension** of nirvana: we describe nirvana as the “final” state of beings—arhathood (which includes Buddhahood).<sup>90</sup> In other words, this is the *final* state of awakening and liberation from suffering: there is “no more of this,” as famously described in the closing of the arhat’s review knowledge, thus:

He understands:	( <i>pajānāti</i> )
‘Destroyed is birth.	<i>khīṇā jāti</i>
The holy life has been lived.	<i>vusitaṃ brahma, cariyaṃ</i>
What needs to be done has been done.	<i>kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ</i>
There is no more of this state of being.’”	<i>nāparaṃ itthatāya</i> (S 22.59,22), SD 12 <sup>91</sup>

**3.4.1.4** It is clear from this statement [3.4.1.3] that there is nothing more beyond this in terms of awakening—no “Bodhisattvahood” or “Nirvana” in the later sense. In this sense, it is “final nirvana” (*pari-nibbāna*).<sup>92</sup> It has no “theological” dimensions—as suggested in Mahāyāna philosophy—in the sense that that there is manifestation of some supreme state in human form (manifestation of some divine essence in the world); nor the emanation of such essence or divinity in the world; nor the “return” to some original state of Godhead; nor the need for further attaining of any kind of supreme state by either the Buddha or the arhat. All this is clearly confirmed by such texts as **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58).<sup>93</sup>

Arhathood, according to the Sambuddha Sutta (S 22.58), is the same as Buddhahood—the only difference is that the Buddha is the first arhat to arise in the world, and the arhats follow his path. Both the Buddha and the arhats have reached the journey’s end, so to speak. They are free from rebirth and suf-

<sup>90</sup> This basic but vital fact distinguishes early Buddhism from later Buddhisms that view arhathood and buddhahood separately, or that even the Buddha himself is only a “manifestation” or “emanation” of some eternal state—this is a theological doctrine known as Docetism.

<sup>91</sup> See, eg, **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59,22/3:68) = Mv 1.6.46 (V 1:14), SD 1.2.

<sup>92</sup> See esp **Nibbāna, dhatu S** (It 2.2.7), SD 50.13.

<sup>93</sup> **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

fering. Hence, we can call this last dimension of our conception of nirvana as **soteriology**—a description of nirvana as “salvation.”

### **3.4.2 The arhat’s posthumous state**

The early Buddhist tradition tends to shy away from any such definition, or even discussion, of the dead saint. As we have seen, the Buddha is insistent on one point, or rather four points: we cannot say of the arhat after death, that:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (1) he exists,                            | <i>hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā;</i>                  |
| (2) he does not exist,                    | <i>na hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā;</i>               |
| (3) he both exists and does not exist, or | <i>hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā;</i>    |
| (4) he neither exists nor does not exist. | <i>n’eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā.</i> |

The ontological status of nirvana, as such, defies any kind of categorization: it is “undetermined” (*avyākata*).<sup>94</sup> Nothing can really be said of it. About what one cannot speak, one must remain silent.<sup>95</sup> Since nirvana has no *ontological* status, it also means that there is no eschatological meaning to nirvana in the spiritual sense. However, as far as philosophy goes, it can still speculate on the nature of the “final things” in Buddhism. But we are beyond that if our task is to meditate and work for awakening in this life.<sup>96</sup>

## **3.5 NIRVANA IN THE ABHIDHAMMA**

### **3.5.1 The Dhamma,saṅgaṇī**

**3.5.1.1** Almost all our materials on nirvana so far has come from the suttas, but we have yet to refer to the Abhidhamma texts. It is helpful for us to examine certain aspects of nirvana from the Abhidhamma viewpoint. In fact, the Abhidhamma teachings on nirvana are clearly formulated in **the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī**, the first and undoubtedly oldest work of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

**The Nikkhepa Kaṇḍa** (Dhs 180-234) of the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, in its explanation of the matrix or summary list (*māṭikā*), helpfully informs us about nirvana. This *māṭikā* embodies a definite conceptual order and begins with the 22 triads or triplets (*tika*): the first 5, for example, concern the process of rebirth and the law of karma. Then follow 2 triads connected with dhyana, after which are 9 more concerning the path (*magga*). The final 6 clearly relate especially to nirvana. Hence, the *māṭika* follow an ascending sequence, starting from samsara and ending with nirvana.<sup>97</sup>

**3.5.1.2** The Dhamma,saṅgaṇī does not use the term *nibbāna*, but instead uses ***asaṅkhatā dhatu***. This is usually translated as “unconditioned element,”<sup>98</sup> that which is unproduced by any condition or

<sup>94</sup> On these “unanswered” or “undetermined” (*avyākata*) questions, see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10. On the noble silence (*ariya, tuṇhī*), see **The silence of the Buddha**, SD 44.1 (3.1; 4); also SD 40a.1 (12.2).

<sup>95</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, orig German: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen” (lit, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922: 7)

<sup>96</sup> For a teleological view of nirvana (in terms of spiritual goal), see SD 50.13 (2.4.2.4).

<sup>97</sup> Dhs §§981-1367/180-234 (Dhs:RD 230-333). For a summary of these 22 “unconditioned elements” and the Abhidhamma triads or triplets, see Cousins, 1984:74-76.

<sup>98</sup> Given as *asaṅkhatā ca dhatu*, Dhs §583/124,31 :: Dhs:RD 253 n4.

cause. This clearly means that it is independent of any relatedness or relativity; nirvana is unrelated to anything else. It is what is philosophically known as *sub specie aeternitatis*,<sup>99</sup> the only one of a kind.

For the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī, the unconditioned element is other than the 5 aggregates, different and unrelated to them. In this connection, its opposite, *saṅkhata*, “the conditioned,” exists *in relation* or *relative to* other things as a part of a complex of interdependent phenomena—that is, in terms of the dependent arising of the 5 aggregates.

**3.5.1.3** It should also be noted that the words “phenomena” and “aggregates” here do not refer to the external world, but to our inner states and mental events, our being. Physical things—matter or the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind)—do not attain nirvana, which is beyond all these elements.<sup>100</sup>

The last 4 aggregates (feeling, perception, formations and consciousness) embody the mind. It makes more sense to say that these aspects, rather than the body or some external thing, attain nirvana. When the mind is fully freed from all defilements, it ceases to exist with the arhat’s death. This is speaking in terms of the 5 aggregates. We should be wary not to speculate or philosophize beyond this, as we would at best be only playing with words—and with the fires of greed, hate and delusion [2.3.2.1].

**3.5.1.4** The Abhidhamma teachings are usually based on sutta teachings, or they are helpful when they clarify sutta teachings without going against the grain of the Buddha’s teaching. The term *asaṅkhata dhatu* probably comes from **the Bahu Dhātuka Sutta** (M 115), where it is one of a series of explanations regarding how a monk is “skilled in the elements” (*dhatu,kusala*).<sup>101</sup>

*Dhātu*, which is usually translated as “element,” in this context, refers to a distinct sphere of personal experience. It means that a visible object, for example, is experientially distinct from an auditory object, from the sense-base (organ) of sight, from eye-consciousness, etc; the earth element is distinct from the water, etc; pleasant bodily feeling is distinct from unpleasant bodily feeling, etc; sense-desire is distinct from aversion, etc; the sense-world objects from those of the form or the formless.

Likewise, the unconditioned is quite distinct from the conditioned as objects of experience. Presumably, notes Cousins, the purpose here is to distinguish conceptually the unconditioned element of awakened experience in order to clarify retrospective understanding of the fruit attainment (*phala,samāpatti*). (1984:73)<sup>102</sup>

### **3.5.2 Other Abhidharma systems**

**3.5.2.1** The suttas go only as far as to say that nirvana is unconditioned; as such, nothing meaningful can really be said about it [3.4.1]. Nonetheless, according to the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, nirvana should be regarded as “real” (*dravya*), while the Theravāda declare that it should not be said to be “non-existence” (*abhāva*). For the Sautrāntikas, even this is to say too much: we should not say any more than that nirvana is the absence of the defilements.<sup>103</sup>

With the rise of the Mahāyāna philosophical schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, we see attempts to articulate the ontology of nirvana in different terms, especially the logic of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and

<sup>99</sup> This is Spinoza’s (1632-77) term, meaning “as a particular manifestation of a universal law, without any relation to time.” See SD 26.8 (1.1.3).

<sup>100</sup> In post-Buddha teachings, sometimes “everything” is said to attain nirvana, or that samsara is no different from nirvana. Such imaginative views are not found anywhere in the Pali canon, but may be understood as later evolving Buddhist mythology.

<sup>101</sup> M 115,8-10/3:63 (SD 29.1a). From here, the conditioned and the unconditioned came to be listed in **Das’uttara S** (D 34,1/3(9)/3:274).

<sup>102</sup> On the def of *dhatu*, further see SD 50.13 (2.3).

<sup>103</sup> Cf Abhidharma,kośa Bhāṣya 2.55d; Vism 16.62-74; Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 1988:609-611.

non-duality (*advaya*). Here, we are magnificently trying to wrap the sky of nirvana in the words and views of philosophy. The truth remains that as our Dharma training advances closer to the path and nirvana, we have less need for words and philosophy (they can, in fact, become hindrances), but to deepen our experience and understanding, and to ultimately attain nirvana itself.

**3.5.2.2** In the face of such challenges, some early Western scholarship were compelled to conclude that there was no consensus in Buddhist thought on the nature of nirvana, or persisted in arguing either that nirvana was mere annihilation, or that it was some form of eternal bliss.<sup>104</sup> If we examine Buddhist writings, we will find those who only propose the view that nirvana amounts to annihilation (where the 5 aggregates that constitute a being are gone and the arhat is no longer reborn), and those who uphold the view that it is an eternal reality.

This, of course, is not the point. These two extreme views persist not because the Buddhist tradition could not make up its mind. For, as we have seen, the tradition is clear on one point: nirvana—as the posthumous condition of the Buddha and arhats—can be characterized neither as existence nor as non-existence. To characterize it in either of these ways is to fall foul of one of the two basic wrong views (*ditṭhi*) beyond which Buddhism tries to steer a middle course: the annihilationist view (*uccheda, vāda*) and the eternalist view (*sassata, vāda*). [3.5.3.1]

**3.5.2.3** After the Buddha, with the rise of sectarianism and religious materialism, the view of nirvana became dimmer, or the view was completely lost, replaced by other imaginative visions or polemic ideology, such as of paradises, eternal Buddhas and cosmic Bodhisattvas, and that arhats need to work for Buddhahood. And so we see the rise of Buddhist theology, the idea of divinized beings and deity.

In north India, from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Sarvāsti, vāda Abhidharma grew into dominance, and one that took the term *dharma* to mean a “reality,” which is given some kind of ontological status as part of a process of reification of Buddhist terms. The idea of nirvana thus evolved into a metaphysical “other,” one amongst many realities. (Cousins 1984:80)

In the south, especially amongst the Theravāda, the term *dhmma* retains its older sense of a less reified, more experiential kind. As Cousins notes: “It is a fact of experience as an aspect of the saving truth taught by the Buddha, but not a separate existing reality ‘somewhere else’” (id). Nirvana is never a part of samsara, the illusory or virtual reality—a house of cards held together by ignorance—its appearance of solidity is fully and finally revealed and removed by our clear vision of nirvana.

### **3.5.3 The ancient city**

**3.5.3.1** Although the various early schools of Buddhist thought articulated the ontology of nirvana in different ways, one thing is clear: they are always attempting to present **the middle way** between existence and non-existence, between annihilationism and eternalism. Any statement that falls short of the middle way in our discussion of nature of nirvana means that we have not really understood what the Buddha has taught—or what he tried to avoid—in the suttas.

“Of course,” notes Gethin, “whether any of Buddhist thought’s attempts at articulating the ontology of the middle way will be judged philosophically successful is another question. And again, the tradition seems on occasion to acknowledge even this.” (1998:78). If our interest is purely academic, the idea of nirvana is a rich field for speculation; if our goal is awakening, then our path is that of shedding the onion skins of views until we reach the core.

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<sup>104</sup> Guy Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters*, 1968.

**3.5.3.2** We can surely try to speak or write about nirvana as clearly and cleverly as we possibly can. Still, it is like being an expert in music writing beautifully about music or giving a technically brilliant commentary on a piece of great music. For those who already know music and have mastered the piece, this would at best be “interesting.” For those unfamiliar with music or that piece of music, even the best of such writings can be boring, even misleading, because they have still not heard the music, or worse, they have no love for music!

Ultimately, then, we must be completely silent, so that we may be all ears listen to the music of nirvana. Where no word, phrase or concept can bring us the taste of nirvana, we can only resort to the silence of the saints, the noble silence (*ariya,tuṇhī*). This is the respectful silence so that we can allow and welcome the truth and beauty of nirvana into our life. [3.4.1.2]

**3.5.3.3** In our efforts to understand the concept of nirvana, words fail in their regular function as the conduits of meaning. What is *meaningful* to us must already be known and felt by us, so that we have some idea of its value. Since we have not yet tasted nirvana—not even caught a glimpse of it—no word can give us any meaningful idea of it or of how valuable it is.

Where words fail to convey *meaning* to us, perhaps we can resort to words or acts to convey feeling, so that we could at least imagine such an experience—visualize, or better, *feel*, what it may be like. Where philosophy fails, we must resort to literature, to metaphors.

Even when such metaphors are able to give us some meaningful idea of nirvana, we still have not tasted it. For, even metaphors are at best spoons to conveniently feed us with the nutritious soup that is a healthy and liberating reality. Having felt the meaning of nirvana, we should now be fired up with the purpose to move towards it and lose ourselves in it.

**3.5.3.4** It is in this spirit that **the Nāgara Sutta** (S 12.65) gives us a beautiful metaphor for nirvana. Even though nirvana is not a place, we are guided to vividly envision the path and its destination: the ancient city deep in the wilderness, away from the world,

It is just as if, bhikshus, a man, while wandering in a forest on a mountain-side, arrives at an ancient road, an ancient highway [a straight, direct way], followed by people in the past.

He arrived there.

Having arrived there, he sees an ancient city, an ancient royal city, inhabited by people, endowed with parks, endowed with forests, endowed with lotus ponds, and surrounded with ramparts—delightful ....

Even so, bhikshus, I have seen an ancient road, an ancient way, followed by fully self-awakened ones in the past ....

This, bhikshus, is that ancient road, that ancient path, followed by the fully self-awakened ones in the past. I followed it.

Following it,

I directly knew

decay-and-death,

I directly knew

the arising of decay-and-death,

I directly knew

the ending of decay-and-death,

I directly knew

the way to the ending of decay-and-death. (S 12.65,19-23/2:105 f), SD

14.2<sup>105</sup>

— — —

<sup>105</sup> Cf Charles Hallisey, “Nibbānasutta: An allegedly non-canonical sutta on nibbāna as a great city,” 1993.



## The First Discourse Related to Nirvana

U 8.1

Thus have I heard.

### The Buddha teaches on nirvana

1 At one time, the Blessed One was residing in Anātha,piṇḍika's park monastery in Jeta's grove outside Sāvattihī.

2 Now, at that time, the Blessed One had been instructing, inspiring, rousing, and gladdening the monks with a Dharma talk connected with nirvana.<sup>106</sup>

The monks listened to the Dharma, receptive, attentive, concentrating their whole mind, giving their ear.

### The full nirvana pericope

3 Then, the Blessed One, knowing the significance of the occasion, uttered this udana:

4 There is, bhikkhus, that place where there is  
no earth, no water, no fire, no wind;  
no base of boundless space;  
no base of boundless consciousness;  
no base of nothingness;  
no base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception;  
neither this world nor other worlds;  
with neither the moon nor the sun.

*n'eva paṭhavī na āpo na tejo na vāyo  
na ākāsānañ-c'āyatanaṃ  
na viññāṇaṃc'āyatanaṃ  
na ākiñcaññ'āyatanaṃ  
na n'eva,saññā,nāsaññ'āyatanaṃ  
nāyaṃ loko na para,loko  
na ubho candima,sūriyā*

5 Therein, bhikkhus, I say, there is  
neither coming nor going nor standing;  
neither dying nor arising [neither death nor birth];  
neither the established<sup>107</sup> nor the occurring,<sup>108</sup>  
nor even this sense-object.

*n'eva āgatiṃ ... na gatiṃ na ṭhitiṃ  
na cutiṃ na upapattiṃ  
appatiṭṭhaṃ appavattaṃ  
anārammaṇam ev'etaṃ*

6 This, indeed, is the very end of suffering.

— evaṃ —

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<sup>106</sup> *Tena kho pana samayena Bhagavā bhikkhū nibbānapaṭisaṃyuttāya dhammiyā kathāya sandasseti samādapeti samuttejeti sampahaṃseti.* On sandasseti ... sampahaṃseti—the 4 “stages of teaching” (*desanā,vidhī*) or the Buddha's grace (*buddha,līlā*)—see **Cand'upama S** (S 16.3) SD 38.2 (4.2.3). For a detailed application, see **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65,17) + SD 35.4a (§17).

<sup>107</sup> “Neither the established,” *appatiṭṭhitaṃ*, ie, without any foothold, or finding of any support for consciousness; hence, there is neither sensing nor knowing. By itself, the term is usually tr as “not finding a foothold.”

<sup>108</sup> “Nor the occurring” or “nor the emergent,” *appavattaṃ*, ie, without any event, eventless, no passing of time.